MARIA ROMANIVSKA

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THE "NIGHTINGALE" OF THE BOG

The hot summer was warming up the waters, and now living in the mild river was all the merrier. In the underwater parks, shoals of fishes frolicked amid the dense algae. The wind puffed up the petals of the water lilies like light sails and made them rock on the waves like splendidly rigged ships. Their leaves floated around them like little green boats.

In the bay, where the water flowed more slowly, there lived a large noisy choir of frogs, of which Croaker was the star singer.

At times the moon was spellbound by those frog concerts and paused over the river. It would fall to dreaming, shed the light of its horns, and turn pale just like the water lilies.

Even the birds, great singers that they were, sometimes praised the frog concerts in the bay.

"That alto is really fine," said Nightingale, the soloist of the Birds' Opera, in praise of Croaker.

And that started all the trouble, because on hearing such words of praise, Croaker decided that he really was a great singer. He put on such airs that he became unbearable to everyone.

"Croak-croak," he would sing. "I'm kin to Nightingale. I've got a great talent; there's no match for me in all the world. I'm the Nightingale of the bog, the famous singer Croaker."

He became ever more puffed up with pride and turned into a disgusting, bloated, lumpish creature. During the concerts Croaker was difficult to please and no longer wanted to sit on the green boats made of water plants. A separate stage of plaited white lilies was made specially for him. A whole retinue of young frogs was placed at his service. Yet this was not enough for Croaker.

"Oh my, is the bog really the place I should be? And should I keep company with these pathetic singers? It would be more fitting for me to sit high up among the birds and solo."

Once as he was daydreaming about his lofty destiny, Croaker suddenly felt he really was rising into the air. But the next moment he was struck with horror, because he saw the round eyes of a stork looking right over him and realized he was clutched in the stork's horrible red beak.

"Oh no, no!" Croaker screamed. "You can't eat me! Better you should take all of our good-for-nothing singers — there'd be lots and lots of frog meat for you!"

A sharp jolt made him shut his trap. When he came to his senses, Croaker saw himself lying in the stork's nest, each of his legs held by little beaks.

"Hold off," said Stork to his children. "This piece of blubber is gabbing something interesting."

"Yes, yes, right you are," Croaker said joyfully. "You can't eat me. It'd be better if we made a deal. I'll arrange a real feast for you."

The deal was that Croaker would deliver up the whole frog choir to the storks, for which he would be spared his life. He begged Stork to carry him up to the top of the big willow where Nightingale loved to sing in spring.

Stork agreed, and that same night Croaker doomed his friends to death.

He announced that he wanted the whole choir to give a concert in honor of the new moon on the river bank. All the frogs crawled out of the water, took up their places, and lustily joined in the Moon Song with Croaker in the lead. All the tenors, basses, trebles and altos piped up in chorus:

Croak, croak!
Silently, moon, walk 'cross the water.
Set your nets to catch the fish
For a tasty evening dish.

That was the password: the storks rushed out of the reeds, surrounded the doomed frogs in a tight circle, and all of the hoppity lot met their deaths, except the traitor Croaker.

It was only the moon who saw the massacre, and it made him cover himself with a cloud from grief. The frog choir was silenced, and even Landrail, who loved to accompany the choir, grew numb with horror.

Croaker, though, was happy. Carried by Stork to the top of the willow tree, he could solo from on high at last.

But while Croaker's voice even seemed pleasant amidst the choir by the river, his song sounded now utterly funny and out of place from Nightingale's perch.

All the birds flocked together to that croaking.

"Now, what voiceless creature is cackling there?" asked Wagtail indignantly and wagged his tail violently.

"Fie," said Swallow, "that's not a song; it's just some jabbering."

"Who's that fat frog who dares to sit on the perch of our great singer!" screached Reed Siskin who had flown quite near and saw Croaker clearly.

"My, oh my," sighed Tomtit who lived in a hollow of the tree. "I can't bear listening to this racket. Guess I'll have to look for a new home."

But Croaker carried on in delight until the moon slipped behind the forest.

Then the old willow tree, who had a musical ear and loved to listen to real songs, started to rustle angrily and gave a good shake to throw off the loud-mouthed squawker. It shook its branches so hard that the frightened Croaker broke off his song and, clutching at anything his feet could get hold of, he screamed:

"This way, my friends! Help me! Help!"

But in the bog below, everything was quiet, because the storks had eaten all the frogs. Not able to hold on any longer, Croaker flopped to the ground.

"Look, there's another of those good-for-nothings," said Stork and grabbed him.

"I'm Croaker, I'm a great talent... I'm..." Croaker tried to yell.

But Stork pretended he didn't recognize him and quietly gobbled up his catch.

THE ANTS' VICTORY

In the land of the peat bogs there grew a strange plant. Tall and beautiful, it was topped by a white flower. Its big lobed leaves were reddish and glossy. They seemed to be lined with a lace of tiny needles, and the base of each stem was filled with juice.

"Oh, that plant must have bucketfuls of sweet jam," said a green fly that was passing by. "It's something I must try." And the fly alighted on the attractive leaf.

The plant seemed to nod in a friendly way, but the fly burst out screaming because it felt how her legs had stuck fast to the leaf. The fly tried to flutter upward, but that instant the two halves of the leaf closed and crushed the poor creature with the tiny needles sticking out along the edge.

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"Help!" the fly uttered a groan. "I'm dying!" She choked on her words as she was drowned in the sticky juice. Her friend cried out in vain to find out what was the matter. Some time later the leaf opened and on its bottom were only bits and pieces of the fly. At this sight the fly's friend darted away in fright.

"Wow, that's some insect swallower!" cried a weevil who had been sitting on a huge poplar and seen everything that happened. "It gobbles up flies with its trap..."

He hadn't finished yet what he wanted to say, when he saw a beautiful dragonfly, her green-blue wings all aglitter, flitting through the air and settling on the glossy reddish leaf. In passing by she had noticed what looked like a fly on the leaf.

The dragonfly tried to take off with a jerk as her beautiful wings stuck to the leaf, but it was too late. The leaf closed instantly and swallowed her up.

"What a horror!" squeaked the weevil.

He lived nearby, and being kind of heart, he spent the whole day scratching a warning on a broad poplar leaf:

BEWARE! GREAT DANGER HERE!

But it was only the little midges whose friends had died in the trap of the killer that paid any heed to the warning. So they decided to help the weevil, settled down near the warning sign, and cheeped or buzzed:

"Look out! Look out!"

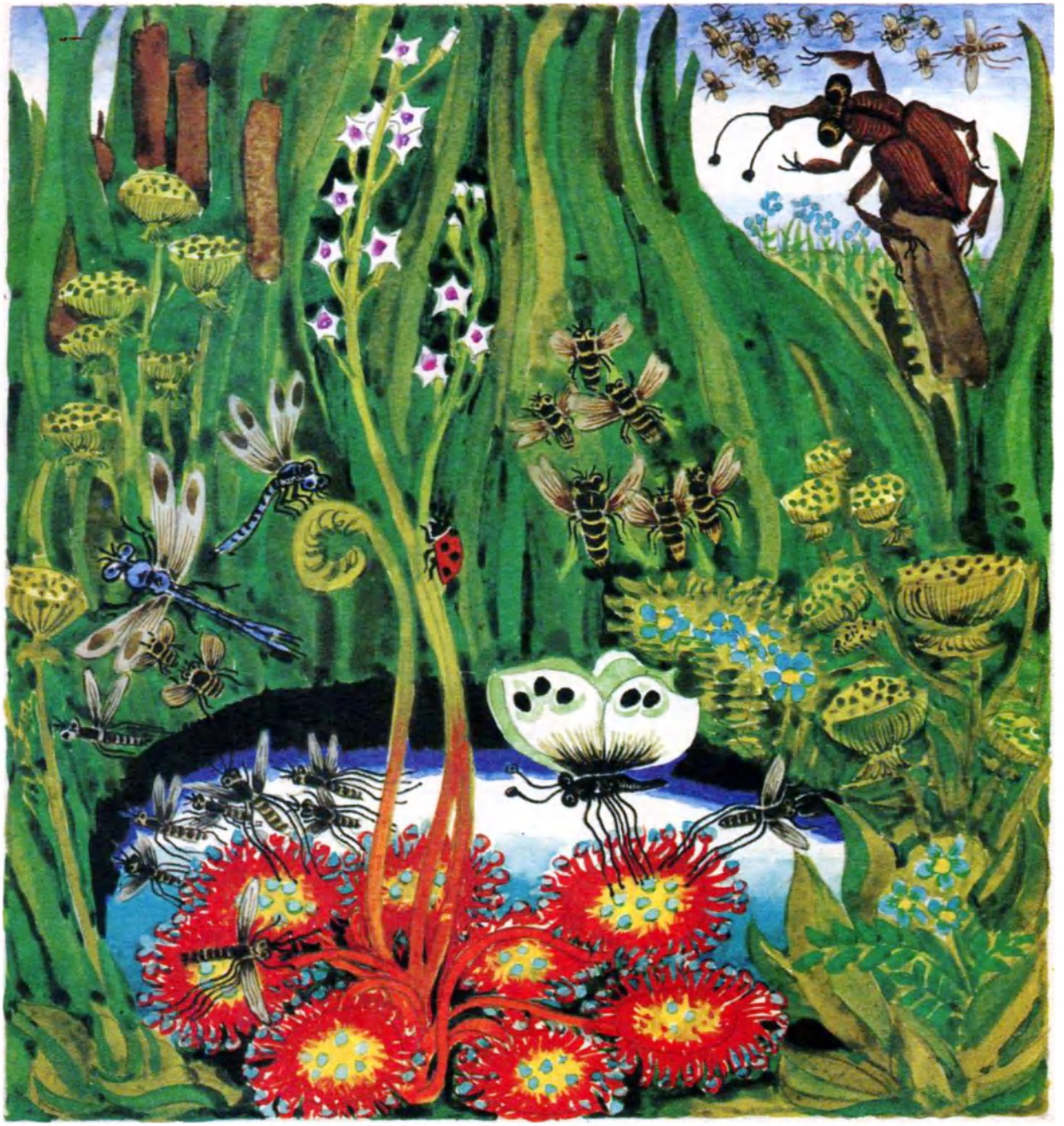
Rarely did anyone pay attention to them. One day a marvelous butterfly met its end: it, too, was swallowed up by the plant. Then a number of glowworms perished when they came to light up the place on a moonless night.

After that a swarm of bees that were lured by the smell of the poisonous juice came flying by. Of course, a number of them instantly met their deaths when the sharp needle-tipped leaves grabbed them, while the rest made themselves scarce with a wild drone.

In the end, the killer plant wore out the patience of the midges, and their leader suggested:

"Let's fly to the learned rhinoceros beetle. He's huge and strong, and is said to be wise and kind. He'll help us get rid of the tyrant."

And they flew off to him. The rhinoceros beetle lived in a tall oak tree not far from the bog. The midges settled on the leaves around him and complained:



"Help us, wise beetle. A cruel plant has appeared to our misfortune. It's luring all our young ones into its trap and gobbles them up. We've been living a merry life, swirling in spring dances on the bog. But now all of us are grieving. We've got a graveyard and not a bog anymore."

The beetle inquired about everything in great detail, but he was not too keen on going.

So everyone started to beg him:

"Your fame as a great athlete is known far and wide. Won't you help us, really? We'll give you the honey of wild bees in gratitude. By the way, the bees have also suffered from that killer."

The beetle took pity on them, gave his consent and flew off.

Oh no, it wasn't the reeds that were rustling, it wasn't the bog violets that were ringing — it was the great rhinoceros beetle thundering on his war path.

When he arrived, he took a look at the killer plant, dug under its roots and said:

"I'll hook it with my horn and make it tumble to the ground in a trice. Then it'll wilt for good."

He hooked the stem with his horn and gave it a good push. All of a sudden everyone heard distinctly how the insect swallower giggled and then seemed to have said:

"Fiddlesticks."

The beetle heard the poisonous leaves rustle overhead, but the stem did not budge an inch. He crawled away from it and said:

"No, thank you, you can take care of that monster yourself. It might fall on me and grab me with its claws."

He quickly took off and flew away.

"He's a big lout and a yellow-belly," whispered the midges. "What if we call his friends?"

"Oh no!" a reed siskin chirped nearby. "He's a loner and has no friends."

The hopeless situation struck horror in the company of midges. It was only the weevil who did not lose heart.

"You know what," he said, "let's call the ants."

"The ants?! Why, they're so much smaller than this giant."

"So what? They live in large colonies. Here we had only one beetle, but they are many and are at one with each other."

"Let's fly to the ants!" the leader of the midges shouted.

So they flew off to the anthill. It was a tall structure with many

storeys, a number of them dug deep in the ground. Everything was in its proper place here. One storey was occupied by the children ants, another was set aside for storerooms, there was a storey for the queen mothers who bore children, and a hostel for the worker ants, after which followed a large hall. The worker ants appeared at the call of the midges, heard them out, and held counsel with one another.

"It looks like you're in real trouble," said the ants. "The plant you're talking about is called sundew. If you don't get rid of it, it'll kill all the midges. All right, we'll help you."

Then the call "Off to battle!" resounded through the anthill.

The ants took up formation and marched off. Moving across the bog, they laid bridges of reed and little sticks wherever they came across impassable places.

When they arrived at the insect killer, they took a good look at it from all sides, and then measured something. One group of ants started gnawing at the stem, while another burrowed under the roots.

"Come on now, heave-ho, heave-ho!" They pushed all as one — and the haughty menace started to crack and then toppled to the ground.

Insects, big and small, came flying to the battle ground and marveled at the ants' victory and thanked them all politely.

To which the ants had only this to say:

"We are many! And each of us is at one with the others. That's what makes for our victories."

VARKA THE LIAR AND THE VIPER-SORCERESS

Varka was a lazy girl, and besides that she simply loved to lie. All the children went to school, but Varka would play hooky.

When she came home, mother would ask:

"Did you go to school?"

"But of course, mommy, I've even got an excellent mark in 'rithmetic!"

But in fact the girl had not been to school for a whole week.

Varka lived with her mother in a large village. Her mommy was the best of all the mothers. She worked as a gardener and raised wonderful flowers. One of her best was the Sunny Flower. It took a long time to raise. Varka's mother watered it before sunrise and raised it for the pleasure and delight of people. Whoever came up to the flower and

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inhaled its fragrance was immediately healed, no matter what his illness may have been.

While the mother worked in the garden, her daughter was twiddling her thumbs. Come autumn, school was the last thing on Varka's mind — she would run off into the woods to pick blackberries, gather mushrooms, and crack nuts.

The shade of the lavish growths of fern lured her, as did the smells of autumnal flowers and the sweetness of ripe berries.

Once Varka met a beautiful girl in the woods. The girl greeted her nicely and took her on a stroll through the woods. The stranger was very much to Varka's liking. She could sing as beautifully as a bird, knew the secrets of the woods, and could find the best berries and mushrooms. Varka went and bragged about her mother and the Sunny Flower she had raised.

The day flowed by fast like a mountain creek. Varka the shirker and liar did not even notice how the sun slipped behind the trees. No sooner had its last rays disappeared from view than the stranger of a girl grew all pale, heaved a sigh, and started to hiss as she turned into a green viper and slipped off into the grass. You see, that was not a girl at all but an evil sorceress.

The following day the sorceress came to Varka's home. She asked the mother if she could have a look at the Sunny Flower: she had a headache, so she said, and wanted to cure it. Besides, she said she had come a long way and was utterly exhausted.

Varka instantly recognized the sorceress and trembled at the sight of her.

"What's the matter with you?" the mother asked her daughter. "Do you know this girl?"

But Varka didn't dare tell the truth that she had rambled in the woods instead of going to school. She dropped her eyes and said:

"No, mommy, I've never seen this girl."

So her mother received the evil sorceress like someone dear who was in trouble and led her to the Sunny Flower.

When evening fell and the sun hid behind the mountain and the last sunray died away, the beautiful girl hissed viciously, turned into a fierce curling viper, pounced on Varka's mother, and sank its fangs into her heart. The mother dropped to the ground, a sigh escaped her lips, and she died. A tear rolled from her eye onto the grass and froze there in a transparent crystal.

"Mommy, my dear mommy!"

Varka rushed to her mother and hugged and kissed her. But her mother was silent. All this made the viper laugh as it whipped its tail, bit off the healing flower, and disappeared with it into the dark.

Varka was crying her heart out so long and so bitterly it made a white swan that was flying above the clouds stop in mid-flight and come down to her.

"What makes you cry so that the little clouds in the sky shudder?" asked the swan.

"How can I not cry when a viper-sorceress killed my dear mother," Varka replied.

And she told the swan everything that had happened.

"There is only one cure for the viper's poison," said the swan. "It's living water. But the evil viper locked up its stream and hid the key in the Green Swamp. As soon as the moon rises, try to catch its first ray. Grab it with both of your hands and follow it. The ray will lead you to the swamp. Still, it will be hard to get the key. This can be done only by one who loves immensely and is fearless."

Varka was determined to save her mother, no matter what the risk. She thanked the swan, covered her mother with flowers, took a little water flask, and set off to the woods.

No sooner had the moon cast its first sheaf of light onto the earth than Varka grabbed hold of the glittering thread and followed its course.

The thread wound its way between the fern, disappeared in the dense grass, and led the girl out to the Green Swamp. Sitting there by the water was a frog as huge as a dog, covered with wrinkles all over, with horrible claws and bulging glowering eyes as big as millstones. It was surrounded by a host of tadpoles that frolicked and romped around in the water.

"Croak-croak," the frog uttered in a hoarse harsh cry on seeing the girl. "Here the water is green and horribly deep. If you step into it, that'll be the end of you."

Varka burst out crying bitterly and whimpered:

"Ah me! I was a bad girl, and because of me a viper-sorceress killed my mother. And if you've got no mother, the sun doesn't shine and the flowers have no smell for you. What I'm after is living water."

"Oh poor, poor girl!" cried the little tadpoles on hearing this. "There's really nothing worse in the world than life without a mother. Do help her, Mother Frog."

The frog took pity on the girl and said:

"You'll have to go to the bottom of the swamp. Down there grows a fir tree and caught in its shaggy branches is the key to the stream. Mind you, the key is guarded by terrible leeches. If you love someone immensely and are fearless, you will get to that fir tree."

Varka was overjoyed at this news: she was ready to do anything to save her mother.

Then the frog called one of the tadpoles, took its gills off and gave it to the girl.

"Breathe through them in the water and you'll stay alive," said the frog.

Varka drew a deep breath, squinted her eyes so she wouldn't be afraid, and dived into the swamp.

As the big-eyed moon shone brightly into the water Varka soon saw a blooming orchard on the bottom of the swamp. In the middle of it stood the shaggy fir tree spreading out its grand branches on all sides. Varka swam toward it, but that instant the water turned muddy and turbid as huge leeches dashed at the girl with a hiss out from every flower. They stuck to her arms and legs, tore at her dress, sucking blood, and tried to get at her heart.

But bent on saving her dear mother, Varka covered her face with her hands and pushed on. The swamp frothed with muddy water like a troubled sea and a horrible whirlpool seethed around the fir tree.

The whirlpool thrashed and spun Varka around, but still she managed to reach the tree and take hold of a branch. And that instant the leeches let go of her and buried themselves in the mud. The water became calm and limpid like a clear spring. The girl pushed aside the branches and there was the tinkling golden key hanging. She took it and rose to the surface.

When Varka emerged out of the swamp, all the trees bowed to her. The frog took off the gills, rubbed her clean with water lilies, and right then and there, all her bruises and bloody wounds healed.

"Now go to the garden of the sorceress and don't be afraid. She lives over there under the oak tree," said the frog and pointed to where the girl should go.

The big oak tree stood not far away. Varka came up to it and knocked against its roots with the golden key. The ground moved aside, and an opening appeared. Varka entered the hole and saw an orchard growing

there. In the middle of it glittered the Sunny Flower the viper had stolen from them. The viper was sleeping in the grass at the foot of a hill to which a marble castle clung.

The viper woke up with a start, saw Varka and prepared to pounce on her with bared poisonous fangs. But no sooner had the girl shown it the key, the viper drew back, whipped its tail and was swallowed up by the earth. Varka quickly opened the castle. Inside, up on the marble hill, there gurgled the stream with living water. She scooped up some into the flask, pulled the Sunny Flower out of the ground by the roots, and hurried home as quick as she could.

Back home, she saw a lot of people gathered in the orchard, about to bury her mother. The girl rushed up to her mother, sprinkled her with the living water, and her mother came back to life and opened her eyes.

"Mommy, dear, please forgive me, please!" Varka cried out.

Weeping with joy, she embraced her mother and promised never ever to lie or shirk from work again. For idleness leads to the dark swamp, the vicious viper, and great woe.

THE ROSE PALACE

Summer came and a large pink rose burst into bloom in the park. It was so beautiful and smelled so wonderful that even the old rhinoceros beetle spread his horns in amazement and rumbled:

"What a beauty! That's not a rose, it's a rose palace!"

All the midges and gnats, butterflies and bugs gathered around the rose on smelling its fragrance and decided to open a club there.

"Oh," said the cuckoo wasp, "we'll get together in these wonderful rooms of rose petals and throw a merry party."

"And I will bring sweet clear honey to the party," said the golden bee.

"And I will bring sweets of yellow water lily pollen," said a colorful butterfly.

"I'll come, too," said a glowworm. "After the sun sets, I'll light you through the whole night."

The young midges clapped their little legs from delight and squealed with laughter:

"We'll fling some fine dances!"

All this talk was overheard by a grumpy stink bug who lived under a raspberry bush nearby.

"He-he, big deal," he whispered. "You'd think it was a wonder to be so pink and to smell so good. I smell, too — so what? I'll crawl into that rose palace and make it my home. It might as well be mine."

The stink bug sneaked into the rose and hid himself between its petals.

Soon the butterfly came with sweets of pollen, and no sooner had he sat down on the rose than something grabbed him by the wing and nipped off its tip.

The butterfly whimpered from fright, dropped the sweets, and took flight.

Then the bee came flying with a jug of honey, and just as she approached the rose the nasty stench of the stink bug made her head spin. She fainted and spilled the honey.

The gnats rushed to her aid and carried her to a stream to bring her to with some water.

"Oh lackaday! Some horrible creature's settled in that rose!" the midges squeaked as they carried the butterfly.

"That's the end of our fun in the rose palace!" all the midges buzzed.

And that's just what the stink bug tried to do. He sipped all the honey from the jug, gobbled up the pollen sweets, and hee-hawed:

"Fine. That's just what I want! Now it's my palace — and that's that. I'm sick of chewing green leaves. Now I'll destroy the pink rose petals."

After gorging himself on the petals, the stink bug became so lumpish and cocky he crawled out of the rose into the sun. A tomtit sitting in a tree spied him, swooped down to the rose and snapped him up in his beak.

But the stink bug was so unpleasant to the taste and smelled so bad the tomtit spat him out on the ground.

And then everyone saw what a wicked and hideous creature he really was.

The stink bug was scared stiff and quickly hid under a bush.

Then all the insects gathered around the beautiful rose that night and danced and made merry to the first blush of morning.

LYUBA'S TRAVEL

Once there lived a little girl called Lyuba. She was a kind girl and everyone liked her. Her mother was kind, too. They lived without father. When he was a young man, he had fought in the war, was gravely wounded and remained sick to his last day. He had died when Lyuba was born.

So now she lived with her mother. Oh yes, they also had a black cat with a white nose named Murka. It had strayed into their home one cruelly frosty day and lived with them ever since. Murka was such a bright cat she understood practically everything. At times when the girl or mother were sad for some reason, Murka would rub her head against their legs, purring and comforting them: don't you worry — everything will be all right.

Indeed, Lyuba and her mother had a lot to worry about.

When Lyuba started the second grade, her mother fell gravely ill. Doctors kept coming to their home, but they couldn't help her.

Winter had just set in and the snow lay deep. The trees wept because the winds had stripped them of their leafy apparel. The birds grew sorrowful, for the snow had covered their food. Some of them left for the torrid lands, while others huddled around people's homes, seeking something to eat.

Those that were bolder came flying up to Lyuba's windows in swarms — common sparrows, bullfinches, tomtits and jays — and Lyuba fed them all.

But once there came large black birds with big wings and huge beaks. Could they be rooks? Lyuba wondered. As far as she knew the rooks had left long ago.

"Those are northern rooks," her mother told her. "Every year they flee from the severe frosts in the north. But come spring, they go back, because they love the land they came from so much. Treat them to something. They're very modest birds, not rough like the others."

Lyuba had a lot to do when the snow started falling every day and the birds couldn't find anything to eat under its thick cover. She fed the little birds millet and bread crumbs, and the rooks little pieces of soaked bread. It was a good thing she lived near a canteen, and the girls working there gave Lyuba the leftover bread. But Lyuba had many other responsibilities besides. After school she helped her sick mother cook the meals and clean the rooms. Her mother's health grew worse and worse, and already she couldn't eat anything.

On hearing how her mother moaned, Lyuba plucked up her courage and decided to go.

"Now, when midnight strikes," Nib said, "get dressed and come outdoors. Leave your mother a note so she won't worry about your disappearance. In the meantime, I'll let my wife know I'm leaving for a while: she's staying with me here."

At midnight, the girl went outdoors and saw the Queen of the Snowflakes. Was she ever beautiful! Her dress was covered with diamonds all over, her broad sleeves asparkle, and her head was crowned with a wreath of snow flowers.

"So off we go!" said Nib and spread his large wings like a saddle for Lyuba to sit on. The girl got onto Nib's back and he took off into the sky.

Presently the girl felt something holding on to her and snuggling to her gently.

Goodness gracious, it was Murka!

The little sly pussy overheard Lyuba's conversation with Nib and was afraid for her mistress.

"It's all right," Nib carked through the whistling wind. "She's light and no burden to me. We'll have to go down anyway now."

They flew on as the people down below wondered what sort of a huge cloud that was, hurtling through the sky with a roar.

The girl felt as comfortable as if she were in an airplane. It was even warm, especially with the kitty at her side.

Lyuba dozed off a little bit.

As soon as dawn broke and the sun burst forth like in spring, Nib touched down on a windowsill and pecked on someone's window.

"You've returned rather early, my friend," said the professor looking out of the window. "We've still got severe frosts around this place."

He came outdoors to greet Nib with whom he was good friends and whom he had fed many times.

Then he saw the little girl with a cat perched on her shoulders.

It would take a long time to tell how Lyuba and her kitty were received hospitably, how Nib was greeted like a hero, and how the professor prepared all the medicine and food for their way back home and talked to Lyuba's mother over the phone, promising to cure her.

Lyuba started to worry: they should have been off by now, because otherwise their coat of snowflakes would melt completely.

At that the professor laughed and said:

"Oh no, my friends. You've had enough of huddling in that cloud of a coat. I'll send a new type of space helicopter for you: it'll bring you home in a jiffy."

He phoned somewhere and soon afterward there was a whirring and rumbling as the helicopter touched down outdoors like a huge beetle.

All the three of them boarded the helicopter and were home in a matter of minutes.

Mother drank the herb solution the professor had sent her, her eyes gleamed with life and her cheeks turned rosy: she was healthy again.

Well, that's the end of the fairytale.

As for the space helicopter, what about asking our cosmonauts what it really looks like?

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